

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." ¹⁷ Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak--that prophet shall die."

Commentary

Much of Chapters 16 through 18 of the Book of Deuteronomy sets down laws concerning the public leadership of Israel, dealing specifically with the power and responsibilities of kings, judges, priests and prophets. But the laws also place boundaries on the authority of those public leaders. Deut. 18:15-20 deals with the authority of Israel's prophets who would arise from time to time to bring a new word from God – a word that could affect both the national and the private lives of persons in Israel. The prophet claimed authority directly from God. Outsiders and opponents claimed the prophet was *self*-appointed, not *God*-appointed. But to their followers, prophets were God-appointed revealers of truth. The primary objective of the authors of Deuteronomy was to create and impose upon Israel a *uniform* law of Moses. But prophets, with their unpredictable appearance and unregulated messages, threatened that uniformity. The authors understood that prophecy was a very real part of Israel's life, so instead of trying to outlaw prophets, they issued laws designed to regulate them and their message. According to Deuteronomy, to be legitimate, a prophet must be from "among your own people," meaning an Israelite. The prophet must also be "like Moses," meaning that the prophet's teaching must accord with the words and spirit of Moses as Israel's unique leader. A legitimate prophet will speak only in the name of Yahweh, and not in the name of any other god. Furthermore, no prophet may speak in Yahweh's name a word not sanctioned by Yahweh.

Reflection

1. The authors of Deuteronomy recognized that the role of prophet, like any role of authority, can be abused. How do we know one who claims to speak in the name of God is speaking a word of truth? What criteria do we use for testing the voices of those who are in roles of authority, whether in the church or in the nation?
2. Scripture, tradition, reason and experience (known as the Quadrilateral) can be used to inform and evaluate the validity of each other and of all sources of knowledge. Scripture as a whole can be used to interpret any particular passage of scripture, just like it can be used to test church tradition or understanding gained through reason or experience. Likewise, church tradition, reason and experience can be used to help interpret scripture. Discuss examples of how Scripture can be used to evaluate the validity of church tradition; or how reason or experience can be used to help us understand Scripture or tradition.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³but anyone who loves God is known by him. ⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." ⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth-- as in fact there are many gods and many lords-- ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. ⁷It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸"Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Commentary

The church in Corinth included both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews followed very strict food purity laws governing the kind of foods they could and could not eat. Meat sacrificed to an idol was definitely off-limits. Gentiles, on the other hand, had never known any religious restrictions on what they could eat. So, now that Jews and Gentiles belong to the same worshiping community, it's not surprising that tensions would arise about what rules to follow. But this passage is about much more than rules. Here, eating is a metaphor for living. The question then is "how are people of faith to live?" In the Greco-Roman world, knowledge was linked to status, but according to Paul, love trumps knowledge. Knowledge is not unimportant, but it is not of ultimate importance. Some members of the church believed that idols had

power and that to eat the meat sacrificed to an idol shows reverence for the idol. And so, they refused to eat that meat, fearing their salvation from Christ would be lost. Others, however, “knew” that since God is the only God, there was no such thing as an idol. Therefore, eating meat sacrificed to an idol was of no consequence to their faith. Those with this “knowledge” considered themselves superior to those who feared idols, and they wanted Paul to confirm their “right” to eat that meat. But Paul says that they are missing the point. If eating meat sacrificed to idols makes one member of the community stumble in their faith, then it is wrong *even if it has no negative effect on the faith of the one eating the meat*. Making moral decisions based on “knowledge” without considering the consequences those actions might have on others, demonstrates a lack of love. What believers “know” is supposed to help them live the life of love. In other words, while knowledge is good, love should always be at the center of both moral deliberation and communal life in Christ.

Reflection

1. Some of the believers claimed to “know” that there are no idols. Idols, however, are more than just “graven images” like Aaron’s infamous golden calf. An idol is anything which takes over your life and runs it for you. For these believers, “knowledge” and the status it conferred had become idols. What are the idols in your life? What affect do they have on your faith? On the faith of others?
2. Earlier in this letter, Paul says that not everything which is permissible is beneficial. And here he says having the *right* to do something doesn’t make it right to do. And yet especially for Americans, our “rights” are often more important to us than love of neighbor. Where does this idolatrous attitude come from? How can we begin to make love a verb (an action) rather than just a noun (a feeling)?

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Commentary

Teaching in the synagogue will soon bring Jesus into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees, who were experts in interpreting the Law. These religious authorities were disturbed by the challenge that Jesus’ teaching and healing posed to their traditions. While scribes and Pharisees interpret the written law, Jesus is the incarnation of the Law-Giver, and so people sense in him an authenticity that is missing in the religious authorities. He is seen as one who “teaches with authority.” Jesus has established his authority over Satan in the temptation story

(vv. 12-13). His disciples then responded “immediately” to his call to follow him (vv. 16-20). Now even demons obey him instantly. The exorcism demonstrates that Satan’s power is being broken up, indicating what it means for the Kingdom of God to draw near. The demons in Mark’s story prove to be more perceptive theologically than the human audience – they acknowledge Jesus as “Holy One of God” and recognize that his coming marks the end of their own domination over human beings. The crowd, on the other hand, sees Jesus as a powerful miracle worker, but they do not recognize him as messiah. The amazement over Jesus’ powers does not mean that the people believe in him. The danger that may be posed by having a reputation as an exorcist is met by Jesus’ command for the demon to be silent (1:25).

Reflection

1. The crowd heard what Jesus said and saw what he had done, and knew that he had authority. But his Sabbath exorcism violated the law of the Jewish faith. How can one who violates the law be seen by ordinary people as having “authority?” How do we decide when to follow the law and when to ignore it? What guides our decision?
2. If the breaking up of Satan’s power is an indication that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, how do we explain the evil that still exists in the world? Can you see signs of the Kingdom drawing near?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 111

- 1 Praise the LORD!
I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
- 2 Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them.
- 3 **Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.**
- 4 He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful.
- 5 **He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.**
- 6 He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.
- 7 **The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.**
- 8 **They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.**
- 9 He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.
- 10 **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.